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Parthia and Nomads of Central Asia. Elements of Steppe Origin in the Social and Military Developments of Arsacid Iran

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To Professor Józef Wolski

Introduction

The Arsacid kingdom of Parthia came into existence as the result of the interaction between the steppe peoples of western Central Asia and the world of sedentary Iran in the 2nd half of the 3rd century BC. Less than a century later, under Mithradates I (170–138 BC), the Arsacid state had become a world power. The empire of the Arsacids, named “Parthian“, lasted up to the beginning of the 3rd century AD, when the old Arsacid dynasty was replaced by the Sasanians. A number of ancient authors (including Trogus apud Justin, Strabo, Pliny the Elder, Arrian, and Curtius) repeatedly testify to the affinity between the Arsacid Parthians and the nomads of the northern steppes in terms of their customs, manner of warfare, and type of dress. Moreover, they emphasize the „Scythian“ – i.e. nomadic – origin of the Arsacid Empire.¹ In order to gain a better understanding of this relationship, it is important to distinguish which nomadic elements contributed to the emergence and historical development of Arsacid Iran.

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¹ Strabo 11.9.2–3; 11.7.1; 11.8.2–3; 7.3.12; Justin 2.1.3; 2.3.6; 41.1.1f.; 41.1.10; 41.2.3–4; Pliny, *NH* 6.50; 112f.; Arrian, *Parth.* Fr. 1.2a; 3; Curtius 4.12.11; 6.2.13f. Cf. also Steph. Byz. s. v. Παρθυαίοι; Pomponius Mela 3.4; 33; Lucan 2.552f.; 8.301f.

The beginnings of the Arsacid kingdom, its social structure and nomadic heritage, are the subject of much controversy. On the one hand, the impact of nomadic components is fully neglected, for example by M. Boyce who vigorously rejected the theory of Arsacid nomadic legacy in the following statement: "Weak straws (...) have been gathered into a meagre bundle of 'evidence' to support the theory of the Arsacids' nomadism".² Also K. Schippmann has denied any significance of the nomadic background in Parthia and argued that to label the founders of the Arsacid state, namely the Aparni, "as nomads from the steppes would be injudicious".³ On the other hand, in recent years awareness has grown that the links between Parthian Iran and the nomads of Central Asia were in many respects strong.⁴ The theory of nomadic origins of the Arsacid state has been combated by J. Wolski, who asserted the conquest of northeastern Iran by the steppe tribe of the Aparni under their leader Arsaces as the "Schlüssel zur Beurteilung der weiteren sozialen Entwicklung Parthiens".⁵ The persistence of nomadic legacy in the social structure and military affairs of Arsacid Parthia was stressed by G. A. Koshelenko.⁶ This issue has recently been approached by V. P. Nikonorov who concluded: "It was the nomadic origin of the founders of the Arsacid empire and its continuing relations with kindred nomadic peoples of Central Asia that underlay in the basis of all of its peculiarities and achievements".⁷

The intention of this paper is to consider ancient Parthian social and military developments in the context of their origins as well as to determine the impact of steppe traditions upon them. It must be stated that these elements of nomadic descent should be separated from those, which the Arsacid Parthians inherited from the sedentary Iranians and from Greeks and Macedonians living in Hellenistic Iran. The sources, which will be discussed in the present study, comprise both pertinent testimonies of classical authors and Iranian evidence.

² Boyce, *Arsacids*, 249.

³ Schippmann, *Arsacids*, 532.

⁴ For the relations between Parthian Iran and the nomads of Middle and Central Asia, see Nikonorov, *O roli*; idem, *Sredneaziatskie katafraktarii*; idem, *Central Asian Nomads*; Koshelenko/ Pilipko, *Parthia*; Zadneprovskiy, *Nomads*; Olbrycht, *Beziehungen*; idem, *Parthia*; idem, *Kultur der Steppengebiete*; idem, *Significance*; idem, *Central Asia*.

⁵ Wolski, *Aufbau*, 380.

⁶ Koshelenko, *Cavaliers*, passim, esp. 193–195; idem, *Zakliuchenie*, 344.

⁷ Nikonorov, *Central Asian Nomads*. Drawing on written evidence and archaeological materials, Nikonorov emphasized the importance of nomadic legacy in Parthian warfare, cf. Idem, *Vooruzhenie*; idem, *K voprosu*.

*The origins of the Arsacid kingdom:
the nomadic Aparni in northeastern Iran*

The history of ancient Central Asia was tied to the relationship between nomad and sedentary populations. The specific features of links between these two groups were due to their differences in economic and social development as well. The areas of western Central Asia with some rich grasslands and several abundant rivers, with semi-deserts, deserts and oases were on the whole not only a land of roaming nomads, but also of agricultural and urban centres developing in the zones suitable for a sedentary life. Thus, it is not surprising that in many regions of western Central Asia, nomads, semi-nomads and agriculturalists lived side by side (e.g. on the lower Amu Darya and in Semirechye). An important point, which should be stressed here is that unlike agricultural production, the pastoral nomadic economy was basically not self-sufficient.⁸ The nomads had to interact with the surrounding sedentary areas to gain access to certain foodstuffs as well as the products of urban manufacture.⁹ In such circumstances, the relations between steppe and sown land determined the development of western Central Asia and of the neighbouring areas, moreover, those links and their implications – particularly in the form of migrating nomads – heavily influenced Iran at several stages of its history.¹⁰ An example of such interrelations is provided by the steppe tribes of western Central Asia who in the 3rd century BC conquered northeastern Iran and started a process that led to the foundation of the Arsacid Empire.

The origins of the Arsacid kingdom were closely linked with the nomadic Dahae, who migrated from Transoxiana to the frontiers of the Seleucid kingdom in the vicinity of Parthyaia/ Parthia and Hyrcania, where they wandered in the region of what is today southern Turkmenistan. From the 3rd century BC onwards, the Dahae settled in the area from the Caspian Sea in the west up to the middle Amu Darya region in the east.¹¹ The people of the Dahae – divided into three tribes: the Aparni, Xanthii and Pissuri – frequently invaded the agricultural zones of northeastern Iran (Hyrcania and Parthyaia/ Parthia), exacting

⁸ For the definitions of pastoral nomadism, see Khazanov, *Nomads*, 15ff. Cf. also Scholz, *Nomadismus*. Apart from nomadism proper one can distinguish various mixed forms of semi-sedentary or semi-nomadic pastoralism.

⁹ On this problem, see Khazanov, *Nomads*, 69–84; Jagchid/ Symons, *Peace*; Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*; Seaman/ Marks (eds.), *Rulers*; Khazanov/ Wink (eds.), *Nomads in the Sedentary World*.

¹⁰ For more details, see: Daffinà, *Nomadismo*; Olbrycht, *Parthia*.

¹¹ See Strabo 11.8.2.

tribute from the local settled population, which was an important source of their revenue.¹²

There is another relevant aspect concerning the role of the Dahae. They were known to Hellenistic rulers as excellent horse-archers (*hippotoxotai/ equites sagittarii*) and are attested in the sources as mercenaries in the army of the Seleucids.¹³ Due to the close contacts with Hellenistic Iran, the Dahae were surely well aware of the internal relations and tensions in the Seleucid Empire.¹⁴ Thus, it is not surprising that in the middle of the 3rd century BC when the state of the Seleucids suffered from internal and external conflicts, the nomads living on the northeastern border immediately took advantage of that situation. The Aparni, a tribe of the Dahae confederacy who lived along the river Ochos (Usboi), under the leadership of a certain Arsaces, seized some of the frontier districts of northeastern Iran. They advanced their conquests “initially without interference from their neighbours” (ca. 250–247 BC).¹⁵

Soon afterwards (around 239–238 BC), Arsaces led the Aparni in an invasion of Parthyaia/ Parthia.¹⁶ When he heard the news of Seleucus’ defeat by the Gauls in Asia Minor, “freed from fear of the Seleucid king”, Arsaces entered Parthyaia/ Parthia with his detachments. Here he defeated the former Seleucid governor Andragoras, put him to death and assumed command of the people.¹⁷ The Seleucid garrisons were annihilated.¹⁸ The conquest of Parthyaia/ Parthia

¹² Cf. Strabo 11.8.3.

¹³ Griffith, *Mercenaries* 143–145, 167 and 251. The Dahae appear in the battles of Raphia (217 BC) and Magnesia (190 BC), but it is quite possible that they fought already at Ipsos (301 BC): in the army of Seleucus I there were 12,000 horsemen „including mounted archers“ (see Diodorus 20.113.4). The Dahae had already fought in the army of Alexander, but the status of their contingent is not clear (see below).

¹⁴ Our sources are meagre, but we can imagine that the role of the Dahae in Seleucid Iran was in some respect similar to that of the Turks in the 9th–10th centuries AD. The Turkish slave guards of the Caliphs achieved at that time an “unenviable reputation for violence” (Bosworth, *Incursions*, 3) and were prized as “the military people par excellence” (Bosworth, *Incursions*, 6). On the other hand, they appear in the sources as robbers attacking the villages and agricultural areas of Khorasan and Transoxiana, for details see Agadzhanov, *Gosudarstvo*, 42–44.

¹⁵ Justin 41.1.11. At first, Arsaces conquered the plains of Nesaea and parts of Astauene in the periphery of Hyrcania and Parthyaia. There, in the city of Asaak, Arsaces was proclaimed king. In Asaak, an everlasting fire was guarded (Isidore, *Mans.* 11); its existence suggests that the act of proclaiming a king had a religious dimension. In the present paper, the chronology of the Arsacid beginnings follows the scheme established by J. Wolski, see idem, *Zusammenbruch*; idem, *Empire*, 37ff. Literature on the establishment of the Arsacid state is extensive, compare Wolski, *Empire*, 52ff.; idem, *Seleucids*, passim; Olbrycht, *Parthia*, 51ff.; Lerner, *Impact*, 13ff.

¹⁶ Strabo 11.9.2.

¹⁷ Justin 41.4.7.

¹⁸ Ammianus 23.6.3.

was followed a little later by the subjugation of the nearby country of Hyrcania.¹⁹ Seleucid attempts to regain their lost satrapies failed, enabling the Arsacids to consolidate their position in northeastern Iran and the adjacent steppe areas. Arsaces’ actions show him to have been a distinguished leader taking into account the political situation not only in the region under his direct rule, but also events in the distant areas, including Asia Minor and Bactria.²⁰

Who was Arsaces? The available sources repeatedly testify to his military exploits. Thus, according to Justin, he had been making a living “by robbery and banditry”,²¹ and was “a man of obscure origin but proven courage”.²² Ammianus Marcellinus says about Arsaces: “a man of low birth; he had been a brigand chief during his younger days, but since his ideals gradually changed for the better, by a series of brilliant exploits he rose to greater heights”.²³ To be precise it should be noted that classical authors often present a very negative view of nomadic life in which the nomads are stereotypically called robbers or brigands. In modern terms, Arsaces was a military leader of steppe nomads attacking centres of sedentary populations, exacting tribute, and, finally, trying to subjugate some settled areas. It seems highly likely that he was for some time a mercenary soldier in the Seleucid army or in Bactria.²⁴

Strabo relates that at the outset Arsaces was weak, “being continually at war with those who had been deprived by him of the territory (*chora*), both he himself and his successors”.²⁵ This statement concerns two aspects: firstly, the subjugation of some areas in Parthyaia/ Parthia at the expense of the local sedentary population, and, secondly, further conquests of the first Arsacids at the expense of the Seleucids and Graeco-Bactrians. In northeastern Iran (Parthyaia/ Parthia), the nomadic conquerors were confronted by two segments of the sedentary population: the Iranian Parthyaia/ Parthians and Greeks as well as Macedonians. The striking achievements of Arsaces I and a prompt, successful establishment of a mighty state were hardly possible without a strong support by large numbers of the sedentary Iranians. It seems that the Greeks and

¹⁹ Justin 41.4.8.

²⁰ Compare the statement of Justin (41.4.8) that Arsaces feared Seleucus II and Diodotus I, ruler of Bactria.

²¹ Justin 41.4.7.

²² Justin 41.4.6.

²³ Ammianus 23.6.2.

²⁴ Principally, Strabo (11.9.2–3) believes that Arsaces was of Scythian – i.e. nomadic – descent. In this opinion he seems to follow Apollodoros of Artemita, the best-informed author writing about Parthian Iran. Yet, Strabo (11.9.3) also knows the view that Arsaces came from Bactria. This supposition does not find any corroboration in the sources, it can however reflect some links of Arsaces with Bactria.

²⁵ Strabo 11.9.2.

Macedonians were the common foe both for the steppe invaders and for large parts of the local population.²⁶ Certainly they were deprived of their leading position and estates, but there was no need to eliminate them fully; the early Arsacids employed Greek builders, artisans (e.g. for minting coins), and artists.²⁷

Little is known regarding the Iranian inhabitants of Parthyaia/ Parthia and Hyrcania, but in the Achaemenid period they were culturally linked both with their western neighbours – the Medes, and with the peoples of western Central Asia.²⁸ It is beyond dispute that during the Aparnian conquest a number of the settled natives in northeastern Iran were deprived of their land estates; the archaeological data testify to the fact that some fertile plains and valleys in the area, including the Sumbar valley and northern parts of the foothills of the Kopeth Dag range, were occupied by nomad hordes in the Arsacid period.²⁹ On the whole, however, the Arsacids must have set limits on their steppe tribesmen not to devastate and occupy most of the farming lands. In some regions of Parthyaia/ Parthia, a stable agriculture can be observed in the early Arsacid period.³⁰ The important role played by the sedentary Parthyaia/ Parthians can be seen most strikingly in the language – it was essentially Parthian, which became the language of the Arsacids and of their nation. It contained, however, some elements typical of eastern Iranian languages, one of which was used by the steppe Aparni.³¹ According to Justin Parthian language was “halfway between Scythian (i.e. “nomadic” – MJO) and Median, and was a blend of the

²⁶ Here it should be remembered that the sedentary Sogdians were strongly supported by the nomadic tribes of the Dahae, Massagetae and Sacae in the war against Alexander's invasion. The political situation in northeastern Iran in the middle of the 3rd century BC was to some extent different from that in Sogdiana under Alexander, but the assumption about a kind of co-operation between the Aparnian newcomers and parts of sedentary Iranians directed against the Macedonians and Greeks is highly plausible.

²⁷ The presence of Greek artisans and builders is to be assumed at Old Nisa in the first half of the 2nd century BC at the latest. This view is vindicated by finds of clay sculptures in the Hellenistic style, which were certainly made in Nisa by experienced Greek sculptors, cf. Pilipko, *Staraja Nisa*, 255–264. In Hyrcanian Syrinx, Greeks are attested about 209 BC (Polybius 10.31.6–11).

²⁸ See Diakonov, *Istoria Midii*, passim; Vogelsang, *Rise*, 203, 284–287, 293–298.

²⁹ Burial grounds of the nomads were excavated in those regions see Marushchenko, *Kurgannye pogrebeniia*; Mandelshtam, *Novye dannye*; idem, *Meshrepitakhtinskii mogilnik*; idem, *Istoriia*; Khlopin, *Antichnye pogrebeniia*; Olbrycht, *Parthia*, 247f.

³⁰ In western Parthyaia, a sophisticated system of underground channels (*qanats*) was in use about 209 BC (Polybius 10.28.1–7). Moreover, in the middle of the 2nd century BC, several decades after the nomadic subjugation of northeastern Iran, a stable farming (including a system of vineyards) was well developed in the vicinity of Old Nisa in Parthyaia, cf. Diakonoff/ Livshits, *Parthian Economic Documents*.

³¹ Henning, *Mitteliranisch*, 93f.

two”.³² It must be emphasized that the languages of the sedentary Iranians in Parthyaia/ Parthia and of the coming Aparni were closely related, and this affinity facilitated the adoption of Parthian by the new elite of nomadic origin.³³

Some sources praise Arsaces as a mild ruler and a judge of his subjects.³⁴ Such a somewhat idealized picture of him is based, however, on real facts: Arsaces managed to make a farsighted compromise between the steppe newcomers and the sedentaries. The subjugation of Parthyaia/ Parthia and Hyrcania was not a devastating attack in Temujin's style. While creating a new state, Arsaces needed officials and experienced administrators from the milieu of the local Iranian population. Similarly, for his army the sedentary Iranians were indispensable as manpower. Arsaces concentrated his efforts on creating a mighty fighting force according to the pattern of a military organisation, which was repeatedly employed amongst the nomads of Central Asia. Justin emphasizes twice Arsaces' efforts to strengthen his military power; thus, the king proceeded to raise a large army³⁵ and levied troops.³⁶ After his victory over Seleucus II, Arsaces settled the affairs in Parthia, built fortresses and strengthened the cities.³⁷ Such measures demonstrate the elasticity of his policy and the ability of the Arsacid clan to adopt certain important forms of sedentary life. The first Arsacids also introduced their own dynastic coinage, which established the view of their farsighted policy tending towards creating a stable state in Iran.³⁸ A strong army and fortified centres were to be the real mainstay of Arsacid power. Evidently, from the early stages of their rule, the Arsacids realized that they would need at their disposal a more politically reliable military force than just Dahae tribesmen. But the links with the steppe were by no means broken. In their hard fought wars on the Seleucids,³⁹ Arsaces I and II were aided by the nomadic Apasiacae.⁴⁰ And thereafter, the nomads were repeatedly emerging as an important – sometimes even decisive – factor in the

³² Justin 41.2.3.

³³ On the close similarity between the Iranian languages (including Bactrian, Sogdian and Median), see Strabo 15.2.8.

³⁴ Ammianus 23.6.3; Suda/ Suidas, s. v. Ἀρσάκης.

³⁵ Justin 41.4.8.

³⁶ Justin 41.5.1. Cf. the development of the Seljuks (11th century AD) who created a regular standing army (Agadzhanov, *Gosudarstvo*, 17).

³⁷ Justin 41.5.1–4. A similar picture is given by Ammianus (23.6.4): Arsaces filled Persia with cities, fortified camps and built strongholds.

³⁸ On the coinage of the early Arsacids, see Olbrycht, *Parthia*, 70.

³⁹ Seleucus II was completely defeated by Arsaces I in ca. 230 BC (Justin 41.4.9–10), and later (209 BC) Arsaces II fought with „extraordinary valour“ against Antiochus III (Justin 41.5.7). On these wars, see Lerner, *Impact*, 33–62.

⁴⁰ Olbrycht, *Parthia*, 59f and 64f.

internal Parthian developments up to the 1st century AD.⁴¹ The Arsacids carried out an active policy with regard to their steppe neighbours and made the kindred tribes of Central Asia one of the bastions of their political and military power. Moreover, they often employed the northern and eastern nomads by recruiting them in their armies – both as auxiliaries and mercenaries –, and were supported by Central Asian and Sarmatian nomadic clans in internal affairs. Finally, in the royal ideology of the early Arsacids, a strong impact of steppe legacy is discernible.⁴²

The exceptional position of Arsaces and of his clan was manifested in many political respects. Every Parthian king was named Arsaces. In keeping with old nomadic traditions of “collective sovereignty”, the polity created by the Arsacids, namely the Arsacid state, was viewed as the possession of the ruling clan.⁴³

Arsaces was worshipped by his successors as the dynasty’s founder and the ancestor of the Arsacid Parthians. To illustrate this issue, one has to mention a statement of the Roman writer Ammianus Marcellinus, who claims that Arsaces “was placed among the stars according to the sacred custom of their country; and (as they believe) he was the first of all to be so honoured. Hence to this very day the over-boastful kings of that race suffer themselves to be called brothers of the Sun and Moon (...). Hence they venerate and worship Arsaces as a god”.⁴⁴ The quoted passage – based on very valuable sources, including Trogus/ Justin – gives a picture similar to the practices attested in the milieu of the nomads of Central Asia and southeastern Europe. Thus, amongst the Hsiung-nu, the ruler was closely linked with Heaven, Sun and Moon.⁴⁵ The Scythian genetic legend emphasizes the divine origin of the ruler and his clan, as it also legitimizes the hierarchical order and social structure: the Scythian king Idanthysos calls the gods Papaïos and Tabiti his ancestors.⁴⁶ Most of the Inner Asian nomads possessed the idea of a heavenly mandate for the rulers

⁴¹ A general study of the Parthian-nomadic relations was presented by Olbrycht, *Parthia*.

⁴² Cf. Raevskii, *K voprosu*; Olbrycht, *Policy*.

⁴³ According to Tacitus (*Annals* 15.2) Vologases I (AD 50–80) placed one brother Pacorus in Media Atropatene and another brother Tiridates in Armenia as kings. These measures demonstrate that the Arsacids viewed their state as their „collective possession“. For parallels in the history of the Turkic peoples, see Golden, *History*, 220.

⁴⁴ Ammianus 23.6.4–6.

⁴⁵ Shih-chi/ Watson II, 167, 171. Cf. Kürsat-Ahlers, *Ideology*, 139ff.

⁴⁶ See Herodotus 4.127 and 4.59. On the divine sanction in Scythian ideology, see especially Khazanov, *Early State*, 426f, and Kürsat-Ahlers, *Ideology*, 137f.

designed to win the subjects’ acceptance of a single, legitimate authority.⁴⁷ In Achaemenid Iran such notions were not known, the king did not claim any divine descent or divinization. Thus, one can assess the worship for Arsaces and the Arsacids as a steppe element originating in the milieu of the Aparnian conquerors from Central Asia. That worship had of course its social dimension: the king of Parthia and members of the royal Arsacid clan occupied the highest position in the structure of Parthian society and in the Parthian state. The divine sanction allowed for the subjugation of all peoples in Iran and existing social relations in the empire.

The Structure of Parthian Society

The social structure of Arsacid Parthia is a crucial issue in understanding the importance of the nomadic conquests under Arsaces I and its impact on Parthian affairs.⁴⁸ First, let us consider the accounts of three ancient authors, who were well acquainted with Parthia: Justin, Josephus Flavius and Plutarch. These accounts – the main classical sources for the study of the social structure in Parthian Iran – are quoted here to facilitate their evaluation.

A. Justin, Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus.⁴⁹

A1 – Justin 42.2.5–6.

Their army differs from that of other races in being composed mostly of dependants (*servitia*) rather than free men (*liberi*); and the dependent population increases daily, since no one is allowed to manumit and all slave children (*servis nascentibus*) are therefore born into a lifetime of slavery. The Parthians bestow as much care on these children as they do on their own, taking great

⁴⁷ Such an idea has deep roots in the history of the steppe (Allsen, *Geography*, 116f.), e.g. in the Turkic *kaganats* and in the Uyghur state. Legitimizing ideologies played an integral role in the emergence of nomadic states.

⁴⁸ On the social structure in Arsacid Iran, see: Wolski, *Aufbau*; idem, *Classi inferiori*; idem, *Aristocratie parthe*; idem, *Aristocratie foncière*; idem, *Bevölkerung*; idem, *Stellung*; idem, *Servitia*; Harnack, *Parthische Titel*; Widengren, *Feudalismus*, passim; idem, *Iran*, passim, esp. 263ff.; Koshelenko, *Cavaliers*; idem, *Zakliuchenie*; Nikonorov, *O strukture*.

⁴⁹ Teubner’s edition by O. Seel has been selected as the basic text for these translations: *Marci Iuniani Iustini epitoma Historiarum Philippicarum Pompei Trogi. Accedunt Prologi in Pompeium Trogum post Franciscum Ruehl iterum ed.* Otto Seel, Stuttgartiae 1985.

pains to teach them horse-riding and archery, and it is the extent of an individual's wealth, which determines the number of horsemen he supplies to the king for service in war. In fact, when Antony conducted his attack on the Parthians, he was met by 50,000 cavalry (*equites*), of whom only 400 were free men (*liberi*).

A2 – Justin 41.2.2.

Next in rank to the kings is an estate of kinsmen/ grandees (*propinquorum/ praepositorum ordo*), from which the Parthians draw commanders in war and officials in peacetime.

A3 – Justin 41.3.4.

They [i.e. the Parthians, MJO] ride horses constantly, using them to go to war and to feasts, and for all private and public functions. On them they travel, halt, conduct business and hold conversations. In fact, the only clear difference between slaves (*servi*) and free men (*liberi*) is that slaves travel on foot, free men invariably on horseback.

B. Plutarch, *The Life of Crassus*.⁵⁰

B1 – Plutarch, *Crassus* 21.7

He [i.e. Surenas, MJO], used to travel on private business with a baggage train of a thousand camels, and was followed by two hundred wagons for his concubines, while a thousand mail-clad horsemen (*kataphraktoi*) and a still greater number of light-armed cavalry (*koufoi*) served as his escort; and he had altogether, as horsemen (*hippeis*) – dependants (*pelatai*) and slaves (*douloi*) – no fewer than ten thousand men.

B2 – Plutarch, *Crassus* 27.2

As the enemy [i.e. the Parthians, MJO] got to work, their horsemen-slaves (*hippotai oiketai*) and dependants (*penesterai*) rode round on the flanks of the Romans and shot them with arrows, while those in front, plying their long lances (*kontoi*), kept driving the Romans together into a narrow space.

⁵⁰ These translations are based on Bude's edition: *Plutarque, Vies, tome VII. Cimon-Lucullus, Nicias-Crassus*, texte établi et traduit par R. Flacelière et É. Chambry, Paris 1972.

C. Josephus Flavius, *Jewish War and Jewish Antiquities*.⁵¹

C1 – Josephus Flavius, *Bell. iud.* 1.255.

Pacorus left with Herod some of the cavalry called by the Parthians “freemen” (*eleutheroi*).

C2 – Josephus Flavius, *Ant.* 14.342.

Pacorus left with Herod 200 horsemen (*hippeis*) and ten of the “freemen” (*eleutheroi*), as they were called.

The Roman historian Justin (probably 3rd century AD) undertook an abridgement of the *Historiae Philippicae* written by Pompeius Trogus in the Augustan period. In relation to Trogus' selection of material, it is worth noting that as his main source for the Parthian accounts in the 41st and 42nd books of the *Historiae Philippicae* served the *Parthika* by Apollodoros, a Parthian writer of Greek descent.⁵² Coming from Artemita in western Parthia, he was by birth a subject of the Arsacid kings. This circumstance and his acquaintance with the peoples of the Orient gave Apollodoros a rare insight into the world of the Arsacid state. Plutarch (2nd century AD) provides much important, somewhat detailed and in general reliable information concerning the war between Rome and Parthia in 53 BC and the battle of Carrhae. His sources were extremely knowledgeable in regard to Parthian affairs.⁵³ Josephus Flavius (1st century AD) gives some extremely valuable information about the Jewish-Parthian contacts and the situation in the Arsacid Empire.⁵⁴

⁵¹ These translations follow the edition: *Flavii Iosephi Opera*. Edidit Benedictus Niese. I–VII, Berolini 1955.

⁵² The view that Trogus drew on the *Parthika* of Apollodoros has been supported by Altheim, *Weltgeschichte* I, 2–23; II, 21–24; Altheim/ Stiehl, *Geschichte Mittelasien*, 359–379; Olbrycht, *Parthia*, 9 and passim; Nikonorov, *Apollodoros*, 107f.

⁵³ Attempts to specify sources for the Parthian affairs in the *Life of Crassus* have yielded little more than speculation. For a detailed discussion of this problem, see Scardigli, *Römerbiographien*, 107–113. Cf. also the proposals of K. Regling, *De belli Parthici*, 8ff. (Timagenes) and Altheim, *Weltgeschichte* I, 69f., 75 (Asinius Pollio). Anyway, it seems quite certain that Plutarch drew on some relations of the Romans who participated in the disastrous Crassus campaign.

⁵⁴ The value of Josephus' Parthian accounts has been demonstrated by Täubler, *Parthernachrichten*, and Rajak, *Parthians*. Cf. also Olbrycht, *Parthia*, 9f.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that all the accounts presented above closely connect social structure and military organization.⁵⁵ These statements merit closer examination, but even the most superficial analysis raises fundamental questions about the employed terms. We must keep in mind that the classical authors tried to translate Iranian designations or to convey relations in Parthia, and the terms used had specific connotations in the Graeco-Roman world, quite different from the equivalents employed in Parthian Iran.

Almost all quoted accounts mention “horsemen” (*equites/ hippeis*). The army of the Arsacids was essentially composed of cavalry, foot soldiers were of little importance. In the light of Justin’s statements (fragm. A1 and fragm. A3), the “horsemen” appear to have been not only a military formation, but also a social category.⁵⁶ With regard to their significance in the social hierarchy of Parthia they may be termed the “equestrian estate”. In Justin (fragm. A3), the “horsemen” (*equites*) as “freemen” (*liberi*) are contrasted with the “slaves” (*servi*), who travel only on foot. Also in Plutarch (fragm. B1), the notion “horsemen” (*hippeis*) is used both as a social term (in relation to the *pelatai* and *douloi*) and as a military one (horsemen as soldiers in the Parthian army).

Apart from the above listed accounts, there are also other classical references to Parthian horsemen (*equites/ hippeis*). An important statement is provided by Josephus Flavius; he reports that Zamaris, a Jew from Babylonia, crossed the Euphrates with 500 horsemen (*hippeis*) – all of them were mounted archers (*hippotoxotai*) – and a group of kinsmen (*syngeneis*) amounting to a hundred men, and was settled by Herod the Great at Batanea (second half of the 1st century BC).⁵⁷ Also in this account a social term (*syngeneis*) is closely linked with a military one (*hippotoxotai*). The Iranian equivalent for the classical terms *equites/ hippeis* – *asbārān* – is documented by Oriental epigraphic remains and literary sources. In the texts from Old Nisa, there is the mention of “horseman Sāsān” – *ssn ’sb’r (y)*.⁵⁸ The purely Parthian form *’spbr(k)* occurs

⁵⁵ On the links between those two spheres in Parthia, see Koshelenko, *Cavaliers*; Wolski, *Aristocratie foncière*.

⁵⁶ Social and military dimensions of the term „horsemen“ are emphasized in Koshelenko, *Cavaliers*, 177, and Bader, *Ostraca*, 270f.

⁵⁷ Josephus Flavius, *Ant.* 17.24; 17.26.

⁵⁸ No 1669, old no. 280-bis, year 72 BC. The document belongs to the group referring to the receipt of wine “personally from” (MN NPŠH) individuals (nos. 1646–1687). It cannot be said with certainty whether Sāsān had a plot for equipment, as suggested by Bader, *Ostraca*, 271. The documents from Nisa are cited here after numbers allotted to the texts in Diakonoff/ Livshits, *Parthian Economic Documents*.

on an ostrakon from Merv, which is dated to the Sasanian period.⁵⁹ A parallel Parthian form is known from the *Dēnkart*.⁶⁰ There are also Old Persian examples of the term under discussion.⁶¹ In the Sasanian *Book of Law - Mātakdān-i hazār Dāristān* – mention is made of a special horseman-document – *asābar nipik (PRŠY’ npyk’)*.⁶² Furthermore, Nisa texts provide information about a “chief cavalry commander” – *asppat (’sppty)* – called Tīridāt (tyrydt)⁶³, and about an anonymous cavalry commander with the same title (*’sppty*).⁶⁴

The Parthian cavalry troops were comprised mainly of mounted archers (*hippotoxotai/ equites sagittarii*). Heavily armoured and armed cavalrymen (*kataphraktoi*) were numerically a relatively small formation, but constituted in fact the most powerful offensive force.⁶⁵ In social terms, the “horsemen” constituted a privileged estate whose origins reached the nomadic conquest of northeastern Iran.

Apart from the terms relating to the “horsemen”, the classical accounts also mention the “freemen” (*liberi/ eleutheroi* – fragm. A1, A3, C1, C2). Thus, Justin knows 400 “freemen” (*liberi*) and almost 50,000 “dependants” (*servitia*)⁶⁶ in the Parthian army fighting against Mark Antony (fragm. A1). Josephus Flavius’ statement (fragm. C1) accentuates that the designation “freemen” (*eleutheroi*) was employed by the Parthians themselves. In light of the classical testimonies, the rank of the “freemen” (*liberi/ eleutheroi*) shows two distinguishing marks: first, it is numerically small, and, second, it appears exclusively as part of the “equestrian estate”. Two of Hesychius’ glosses provide insight into the meaning of this rank: ἀζήται, “intimates of the king”⁶⁷, and ἀζάτη, “freedom” (*eleutheria*).⁶⁸ Hesychius’ statements indicate that the “freemen” (*azetai*) formed the elite of Parthian nobility closely connected with the

⁵⁹ Livshits/ Nikitin, *Epigraphic remains*, 116f.; V. A. Livshits apud Bader, *Ostraca*, 271. Paleographic dating: 3–5 centuries AD, archaeological dating: 5–6 centuries AD. The ostrakon was discovered by Z. I. Usmanova’s at Gyaar-kala (1973, trench 9).

⁶⁰ Ed. Madan, 241, l. 17: *’spw’r (aspwār)*.

⁶¹ *asa-bāra-*: DNb 41, 44, 45; DB II.2.71; III.41.72. Cf. Bader, *Ostraca*, 271.

⁶² MHDA 16.11–15; 17.11; 19.2–6 (Ritterurkunde/ Ritterbrief). Cf. Macuch’s commentary (*Rechtsbuch*, 173f. and 178).

⁶³ Nos. 1646–1658. On the ostraca nos. 1646–1653, a date – corresponding to 76 BC – is preserved. Cf. Bader, *Ostraca*, 270.

⁶⁴ No. 2685, compare Bader, *Ostraca*, 270.

⁶⁵ In the war against Mark Antony (36 BC), the Arsacid king Phraates IV had at his disposal 50,000 horsemen including 400 cataphracts (Justin, fragm. A1). Vologases I (AD 50–80) offered 40,000 mounted archers to assist Vespasian (Sueton, *Vesp.* 6.4; Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.51).

⁶⁶ On the Latin term “servitium”/ “servitia”, see Glare, *Dictionary*, 1746.

⁶⁷ *Hesychii Alexandri Lexicon*, ed. Latte 1469 D.

⁶⁸ *Hesychii Alexandri Lexicon*, ed. Latte 1442 D.

king.⁶⁹ In this sense, the “freemen” can be identified with the so-called *syngeneis* – kinsmen of the kings or grandees – mentioned by Strabo⁷⁰ and Josephus Flavius.⁷¹

The classical accounts tend to differentiate another meaning of the term “freemen” (*liberi/ eleutheroi*). Justin refers namely to the “freemen” (*liberi*) as a social formation in opposition to the *servi - pedites* (fragm. A3), and in this sense the “freemen” denote the whole Parthian nobility which was principally free. The *servi* mentioned by Justin, travelling on foot, were for the most part not real slaves without civic rights, but peasants and townsmen. Actually, they made up a lower social rank in Parthian society (see below).

In Middle Persian and Parthian texts of the Sasanian period, the expression *āzād* (plur. *āzādān*) is widely attested as designating a free man.⁷² In Armenia, the term *azatk'* (plur.), a derivative of the Iranian *āzād*, referred to the middle and lower nobility as opposed to the grandees (*naxarark'*). At the same time, however, *azatk'* was used to designate the entire nobility, especially in contrast to the commoners (*šinakank'* – peasants, villagers and town-dwellers).⁷³ The situation in Armenia is of particular importance for a discussion of the social structure in the Arsacid Empire; it is well known that Parthia exerted a strong influence on Transcaucasia in regard to political affairs, language and culture.⁷⁴ Considering the close links and similarities between Parthia and Armenia, and taking into account the available data, one can conclude that the term *āzādān/ liberi/ eleutheroi* signified principally the entire body of the Parthian nobility (ordinary nobles or knights as well as grandees), but in a narrower sense it referred to the upper rank of nobility (grandees alone), standing next to the king.

In the classical sources, several designations appear for Parthian great lords or grandees. This highest rank of nobility was constituted by the most powerful clans from among the rank of the “freemen” (*āzādān/ liberi/ eleutheroi*). One of Justin's statements (fragm. A2) mentions an *ordo*, i.e. a social estate called

⁶⁹ Both glosses reflect Parthian forms. Cf. De Blois, *Freemen*, 5 (*āzāt-ih; *āzāta-, with the Greek plural suffix -ai). Additionally it is interesting to notice that in one of the documents discovered at Avroman (1st century BC), the name Azate is attested (wife and half-sister of Mithradates II), cf. Karras-Klapproth, *Prosopographische Studien*, 44.

⁷⁰ Strabo 11.9.3.

⁷¹ Josephus Flavius, *Ant.* 17.24; 17.26.

⁷² Actually, the word *āzād* possessed two meanings: “free”, as opposed to “slave”, and “noble” as a member of a noble clan (cf. De Blois, *Freemen*, 5 and 11). A detailed discussion of the term is presented by Chaumont, *Āzād*. Cf. Lukonin, *Institutions*, 700.

⁷³ Chaumont, *Āzād*, 170; Toumanoff, *Armenian azat*.

⁷⁴ For details, see Chaumont, *Armenia and Iran*, 419–438, esp. 433ff.

propinqui or *praepositi*.⁷⁵ It is certain that the highest society rank is meant, from which the Parthians draw their commanders and officials. Another term designating the highest category of the Arsacid nobility was the word *syngeneis* signifying probably not only real kinsmen but also other grandees standing close to the king.⁷⁶ As a whole, classical authors offer for Parthian magnates several designations: *megistanes*⁷⁷, *primores*⁷⁸, *nobiles/ nobilitas*⁷⁹, *illustres Parthi* (regarding the powerful clan of Carenēs)⁸⁰, *proceres*⁸¹, and *aristoi*.⁸² Under the early Sasanians (3rd century AD), a fourfold internal division of the nobility is noted. Grandees (*vuzurgān*), including the mighty clans of the Sūrēn and Kārin, constituted the third category of aristocracy followed by the ordinary *āzādān*.⁸³ The magnates were preceded by *šahrđārān/ šahryārān* (kings or dynasts, including Sasanian sub-kings) and *vāspuhrāgān/ wispuhrān* (princes of the royal blood).

In the Arsacid state, the position of the grandees was of particular importance. It was the clan of the Sūrēn, which played a leading role amongst the rank of the great lords and enjoyed “the ancient and hereditary privilege of being first to set the crown upon the head of the Parthian king”.⁸⁴ Plutarch's statement refers to the year 53 BC, but if the mentioned custom was so ancient, its origins must have reached several generations earlier, i.e. up to the beginnings of the Arsacid state. It is therefore highly probable that the Sūrēn were,

⁷⁵ In the passage under consideration there is a corruption regarding the term preceding the word “ordo”. In my opinion, a conjecture into “propinquorum” (Altheim/ Stiehl, *Geschichte Mittelasiens*, 458f.) or perhaps “praepositorum” (this I. Jeep's conjecture (Iustini Historiae Philippicae recensuit Iustus Jeep, Lipsiae, 1859 - accepted Lukonin, *Institutions*, 699) is highly probable. The form “probolorum” occurs in the editions by F. Rühl (Lipsiae, 1886) and O. Seel (Lipsiae, 1985), but historically it does not make good sense and should be abandoned.

⁷⁶ Strabo 11.9.3; Josephus Flavius, *Ant.* 17.24. This term is attested already in the Achaemenid period. A comprehensive discussion is to be found in Jacobs, *Die Verwandten*.

⁷⁷ Sueton, *Caligula*, 5; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.27 (*megistanes* in Armenia); Frontinus, *Strateg.* 2.9.5 (*megistanes* in Armenia). Seneca (*Ep.* 21.4) broadly refers to *megistanes* and *satraps*, but does not mention the Parthians in the passage. It is plausible that the term *megistanes* was used by the Parthian themselves, and the Romans borrowed it due to close contacts with Parthia during the early 1st century AD.

⁷⁸ Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.2; 6.31; 6.37.

⁷⁹ Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.31; 11.10; 12.10. Cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.2 (*Monaesi nobili viro*).

⁸⁰ Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.12.

⁸¹ Statius, *Thebais*, 8.289.

⁸² Plutarch, *Crassus* 30.2 (tip by V. P. Nikonorov).

⁸³ On the third nobility rank in the early Sasanian epoch see Tafāz̄zoli, *Bozorgān*.

⁸⁴ Plutarch, *Crass.* 21.7.

as the Arsacids, of nomadic, Aparnian stock, and that they played a significant role in establishing the Arsacid kingdom.⁸⁵

Another question, which should be examined closely is the role of lower classes in Parthian society.⁸⁶ Plutarch (fragm. B1, B2) and Justin (fragm. A1) use specific terms to designate the majority of Parthian armed troops. These designations are strictly speaking not military but social ones, and point to a dependent status of the warriors forming the bulk of the troops. The authors give the following equations:

Plutarch (fragm. B1): hippeis = pelatai + douloi

Justin (fragm. A1): equites = liberi + servitia

What is remarkable in Plutarch's description of the battle at Carrhae is the fact that he does not employ the term "freemen" (*āzādān/eleutheroi*). But there must have been "freemen" in the Parthian army at Carrhae. The Parthian commander Surenas and an officer in his troops, Sillaces, satrap of Mesopotamia, were surely "freemen".⁸⁷ Still, it is hardly possible that in such a powerful army as that of Surenas at Carrhae there were only two members of the "freemen"-rank. But Plutarch also mentions *aristoi* among Surenas' followers,⁸⁸ and they can conceivably be equated with the *eleutheroi* or *liberi* known from other accounts. Thus, in all likelihood, amongst the warriors called by Plutarch *pelatai* there were a number of "freemen". If so – how can we explain Plutarch's terminology? It is not by chance that he employs the term *pelatai* which designated in the Greek world groups of dependent populations,⁸⁹ and which was often used as a social term for non-Greek peoples, including Illyria,⁹⁰ and the

⁸⁵ It is within this context that another statement of Plutarch (24.2) is relevant, in which he describes the hairstyle of the Parthians in the Surenas' army as "Scythian", i.e. nomadic. On the „nomadic“ character of the Parthians in Plutarch, see Bernard, *Plutarque*. There is another point, which should be noted: in the battle of Carrhae, specific percussion instruments were employed by the Parthians, which exerted strong psychological impact upon enemies (Plutarch, *Crass.* 23.9; 26.4). Such instruments, noted also in other testimonies, had not been known in Iran before the Arsacids and they originated among steppe nomads. The whole problem has been studied in depth by Nikonorov, *Musical Percussions*.

⁸⁶ On this issue, see Wolski, *Classi inferiori*; idem, *Bevölkerung*.

⁸⁷ See Plutarch, *Crass.* 21.4; 33.3. Cf. Karras-Klapproth, *Prosopographische Studien*, 159–161. The status of Exathres, who killed Crassus, cannot be estimated (Karras-Klapproth, *Prosopographische Studien*, 55f.).

⁸⁸ Plutarch, *Crass.* 30.2.

⁸⁹ On the *pelatai*, see Gehrke, *Pelatai*. Similar connotations had also the term *penestai* referring to the dependant population in Thessaly, see Cartledge, *Penestai*.

⁹⁰ Theopompus, *FGrHist* 115 F 40.

Bosporan kingdom.⁹¹ Three important points should be stressed at this stage. Firstly, the Latin equivalent for *pelatai* was the designation *clientes*.⁹² Secondly, the term *clientes* is found in Roman sources with regard to Parthian nobles.⁹³ It is therefore conclusive that the *pelatai* in Plutarch were not commoners of low rank⁹⁴ but noble dependants or bondsmen of Surenas. Thirdly, in one of the classical sources, Surenas is designated as "lord of a thousand *oiketes*".⁹⁵ The word *oiketes* should not be understood here as relating to the real slaves but again to the bondsmen of Surenas who formed apparently the bulk of the mighty division of cataphracts (1,000 soldiers) in the battle of Carrhae. In one of his statements Plutarch also uses the term *oiketai*, derived from *oiketes*, for some Parthian soldiers at Carrhae (fragm. B2, see below). But it seems that the designation *oiketai* (and *douloi*) in Plutarch signify the attendants of the nobles recruited mostly from the sedentary peasants (see below).

According to Justin's description of the Parthian army, there were just 400 "freemen" (*liberi*) in the military forces led by Phraates IV against Mark Antony. The rest – all generally termed *servitia* – surely comprised several categories, including dependants and bondsmen of the king as well as of the grandees. Some of the *servitia* were in all likelihood horsemen recruited from among peasants trained for service in war, as stated by Justin (fragm. A1). Considering terminological and factual parallels between the accounts in Plutarch (fragm. B1) and Justin (fragm. A1), the assumption can be made that the *servitia* in Justin are to be equated with both the *pelatai* and the *douloi* in Plutarch's account.⁹⁶

A further issue to be evaluated is the term *servi* as a social category in Justin. According to this historian, Parthian society was divided into *liberi* ("freemen") and *servi*. The latter travelled only on foot, and this implies that they were excluded from the "equestrian estate". Apparently, the *servi* belonged to the non-nomadic rural and urban populations in Parthia proper and in other regions under the direct rule of the Arsacid kings or controlled by the members of the highest Parthian families (e.g. in Media and Sakastan). It

⁹¹ *CIRB* 976 (AD 151).

⁹² Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Rom. Ant.* 1.81.2; 1.83.3; 2.9.2; 2.10.1ff. See also Gehrke, *Pelatai*, and Nikonorov, *O structure*, 20.

⁹³ Tacitus (*Ann.* 12.14) mentions Parraces, a client of Vonones I. Cf. Karras-Klapproth, *Prosopographische Studien*, 127.

⁹⁴ According to Koshelenko, *Zakliuchenic*, 346, *pelatai* are to be equated with peasants.

⁹⁵ Theodoret, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.39. The text offers the name Σουήνην (see *Theodoret's Ecclesiastical Histories*, recensuit Thomas Gaisford, Oxonii 1854, p. 241, 10), but Nöldeke, *Tabari*, 76, Anm. 2 has convincingly corroborated the form into Σουρήνην.

⁹⁶ Similarly also Wolski, *Relations*; idem, *Servitia*, 98f.

should be stressed that a number of the *servi* underwent the same pattern of military training as the nobles; Justin (fragm. A1) reports: "Parthians bestow as much care on the servi-children as they do on their own, taking great pains to teach them horse-riding and archery". Thus, the term *servi* in Justin should not be taken literally as "slaves", but rather as "servants/ retainers". Similarly, the *douloi* in Plutarch, referring to the mounted archers in Surenas' army, are to be identified not as real "slaves", but as members of the rural and urban populations dependent on the nobles called in the passage under discussion *pelatai*.⁹⁷ Plutarch (fragm. B2) employs two other terms for the Parthians in Surenas' army at Carrhae, namely *penesteroi* – apparently a derivative of *penestai*⁹⁸ – and *oiketai*. Both designations correspond with the terms *pelatai* and *douloi* used in passage B1 respectively. The status of the *douloi/ oiketai/ servi* was defined by the nomadic conquest of northeastern Iran – the sedentary Iranians from villages and towns were forced to accept the new rigid hierarchy, in which the nobility of nomadic descent would predominate.

There is another point regarding Iranian society, which should be noted. In the Iranian languages, the term *bandaka* (Old Persian) or *bandag* (Middle Persian) is attested, which means "owing to the servile submission to masters".⁹⁹ The form *bandaka* occurs first in the inscription of Darius I at Bīsūtūn: all Darius' generals, except his father, are named *bandaka* (Vidarna, Vindafarnā, Gaubaruva and others). They all were noblemen of high rank, but subordinate to the king.¹⁰⁰ For the Greek authors, the entire Persian people under the Achaemenids were "a crowd of slaves" of the king.¹⁰¹ Strikingly, in Darius' letter to Gatas, *bandaka* was rendered by the word *doulos*, meaning in Greek "slave".¹⁰² Principally, *bandaka/ bandag* denoted under the Achaemenids and Sasanians people subject to the king, namely loyal servants and vassals, as well as people dependent on men of higher rank,¹⁰³ and it could be applied to every subject of the sovereign. Thus, even the phrase *šāhān šāh bandag* – "subject of the king of kings" – is attested.¹⁰⁴ The term *bandag* is of crucial relevance for evaluating the accounts of Justin and Plutarch on Parthian society and military

⁹⁷ The real slaves, i.e. people without civil rights, were not present in the Parthian army. For the slaves (*anšahrīg/ wardag*) in Parthian and Sasanian Iran, see Macuch, *Barda*, 763f.

⁹⁸ Cf. Cartledge, *Penestai*.

⁹⁹ Cf. Eilers, *Banda I*; Widengren, *Feudalismus*, 21ff.

¹⁰⁰ Herrenschmidt, *Banda II*, 683f.

¹⁰¹ Herodotus, 7.135; Xenophon, *Anab.* 2.5.38. Cf. Aeschylus, P. 242.

¹⁰² I. Magnesia 115.4. Here, the King of Kings calls his satrap in Ionia his slave (*doulos*). Cf. Dandamaev, *Barda*, 762.

¹⁰³ Herrenschmidt, *Banda II*, 684. *Banda* might have been applied to real slaves in only a few cases in the documents of the Sasanian epoch.

¹⁰⁴ Macuch, *Barda*, 764.

organization. In Plutarch, *bandag* can be applied to the ordinary nobles called *pelatai*, as dependants or bondsmen of the great lord Surenas and – in some cases – of the Arsacid King, whose commander named Sillaces fought in the battle. In Justin, the upper rank of the *servitia* was constituted by the ordinary nobles, thus their status is comparable with the *pelatai* in Plutarch.

It seems that the rank of ordinary nobles was formed by Aparnian tribesmen of lower status (pauperized nomads) as well as by a number of Parthian knights of sedentary origin.¹⁰⁵ As a whole, they were clients of their richer kinsfolk, and remained dependent on the magnates belonging to the rank of upper nobility. In the Arsacid Parthian army they fought – alongside the grandees – partially as heavily armoured horsemen/ cataphracts (e.g. in the army of Surenas), but it seems plausible that the majority of them formed horse-archers' units.

Taking an overall view, the main principle defining the social structure of Parthia was a clear, strong stratification with a very limited elite and the vast majority of the population in the rank of dependants or retainers/ servants. At the apex of the structure stood the clan of the Arsacids. Next to the royal clan great families are attested, including the most powerful Sūrēn and Kārin. These great clans formed the highest rank amongst the so-called "freemen" (*āzādān/ liberi/ eleutheroi*), and they originated – as for example the Sūrēn – from among the nomadic supporters of Arsaces I.¹⁰⁶

The rest of the nobles comprised ordinary knights of lower status, who were socially related to the grandees and the king as bondsmen or dependants (*bandag/ pelatai*, in Justin the elite of the *servitia*). This rank included knights of both nomadic and sedentary Parthian origin. The ordinary nobles and grandees constituted the so-called "equestrian estate" (*asbārān/ hippeis/ equites*).

Next to the social stratum of the "horsemen" there was an estate comprising peasants and townsmen, i.e. the sedentary population of Parthyaia, Hyrcania and other areas in Iran conquered by the Parthians. They were termed *douloi* in Plutarch, in Justin they occur as *servi* and as commoners from among the *servitia*. They were dependent on the nobles of higher and lower ranks. A significant number of them were recruited to the Parthian army.

The social structure of Parthia was characterized by strong dichotomies between the "freemen" (*āzādān/ liberi/ eleutheroi*) and the rest of the population,

¹⁰⁵ According to Nikonov, *O strukture*, 20, this social category formed ordinary Dahaeen nomads. But it is probable that a number of noble sedentary Parthians – providing excellent cavalry troops, as did the Aparni – were incorporated into that rank.

¹⁰⁶ On the nomadic origins of the Parthian grandees, see Wolski, *Aristocratie parthe*, 133; Koshelenko, *Cavaliers*, 191.

similarly between the "equestrian estate" (*asbārān/ equites/ hippeis*) and non-cavalrymen. It is essential to realize that such dichotomies were the result of the Aparnian conquest of northeast Iran under Arsaces I.¹⁰⁷ This subjugation of the indigenous settled population by the invading nomads had created the specific, rigid structure of Arsacid Parthian society, in which the victorious nomads and some parts of the sedentary nobility formed the upper social ranks, but the vast majority of sedentary populations became socially and economically dependent on the clans of nomadic origin. That this division remained rigid can be deduced from Justin, when he claims no one is allowed to manumit and all servi-children are therefore born into a lifetime of slavery (fragm. A1).

When analyzing the social structure, striking similarities can be observed between the Parthian and Scythian societies.¹⁰⁸ It should be noted that the Scythian kingdom was a state similar to the Arsacid kingdom: in Scythia, there was a large dependent population – servants, clients, tenants and tributaries. There were, however, several estates with full rights – the ordinary Scythians, the aristocracy and the royal lineage or clan, probably also the priesthood.¹⁰⁹ The Scythian commoners formed the bulk of the army. The Royal Scythians considered all other Scythians their slaves,¹¹⁰ which mirrors the position of the Arsacids and of the "freemen" in Parthia towards the rest of the population. On the whole, rigid social systems based on an opposition between new ruling ranks and the conquered indigenous subjects existed in the states, which emerged as the result of rapid military subjugations.¹¹¹

It remains to be seen whether the Parthian social structure was inherited from Achaemenid Iran. In the Achaemenid period, there was naturally a social stratification, but without rigidly limited ranks. There is no evidence of a rigid social structure resembling that of Parthia in the many sources for the period. There were no "freemen" as a social group. The only attested dichotomy be-

¹⁰⁷ Cf. a similar conclusion in Koshelenko, *Cavaliers*, and *Zakliuchenie*, 344.

¹⁰⁸ The socio-political structure of Scythia analyzes Khazanov, *Early State*, 431ff.

¹⁰⁹ Khazanov, *Early State*, 433f.

¹¹⁰ Herodotus 4.20. See Khazanov, *Early State*, 435.

¹¹¹ Such strictly stratified social systems are attested in ancient Greece in Sparta and Thessaly. In both cases, the subjugation of the indigenous peoples led to the creation of estates comprising the conquered inhabitants called respectively *helotai* or *penestai*, cf. Hunt, *Slaves*, passim, and Welwei, *Unfreie*, passim.

tween the rich and the poor is rather vague.¹¹² Such dichotomies as free/ unfree or horsemen/ not-cavalrymen did not exist in Achaemenid Iran.¹¹³

Parthian customs and costume

There is another sphere in which nomadic influence can be observed. In Arsacid history, customs and dress determined the specific picture of the Parthians as a people. Particularly, it was horse-riding, archery and riding clothing which occur in the sources as most striking hallmarks of the Parthians (cf. fragm. A1).

What were the sources of Parthian manners and customs? Are they to be linked with the Achaemenid period, with the old Persian or Median traditions of western Iran? Clearly, to the old Iranian way of life belonged a military training in horse-riding and archery, as similar to the Achaemenid Medes and Persians.¹¹⁴ However, under the Achaemenids other military virtues were equally valued, including training as foot-warriors using lances or javelins. The fact of the matter is that the noble Persians were schooled for service in war both afoot and on horseback¹¹⁵ and they formed not only cavalry troops, but also infantry units.¹¹⁶ Sources relating to the Arsacid Parthians present quite a different picture. In the Parthian regular army of the Arsacid epoch only cavalry units formed the real kernel of Parthian military power,¹¹⁷ and we hear nothing about infantry from among the Parthian nobility.¹¹⁸ In one of his grave inscriptions from Naksh-e Rostam (DNb), the Achaemenid king Darius I (521–486 BC) boasts about his military valour: "As a horseman I am a good horse-

¹¹² Nobles (*āmāta*) or strong men (*tunuvant*) are in some Persian inscriptions contrasted with poor people (*skauθ i*, Greek *autourgoi*). For the opposition *skauθ i/ tunuvant*, see DNb 8–11. For the privileged groups in Persian society, see Herodotus 1.133; 1.206; Strabo 15.3.19.

¹¹³ R. Frye, *Institutions*, 85f. emphasizes the unclarity of social divisions in Achaemenid times and rightly remarks: "There is no evidence that in the Achaemenid period the classes of society or castes were institutionalized".

¹¹⁴ E.g. in Herodotus 1, 136.

¹¹⁵ Herodotus 1.136; 9.122; Strabo 15.3.18f.; Xenophon, *Kyr.* 1.2.9–11.

¹¹⁶ Herodotus (7.40–41) maintains that the guard troops of Xerxes comprised a thousand spearmen "of the best and noblest blood of Persia" and ten thousand footmen chosen out "of the rest of the Persians". According to Strabo (15.3.19) the Persians served in the army and held commands from twenty to fifty years of age, both as foot soldiers and as horsemen. Cf. Head, *Achaemenid Persian Army*, 22–30 and 39–44; Wiesehöfer, *Persien*, 133. Xenophon (*Kyroupaideia* 4.3.23) clearly exaggerates when he claims that no noble Persian may have been seen going on foot.

¹¹⁷ Olbrycht, *Parthia*, 262f.

man. As a bowman I am a good bowman both afoot and on horseback. As a spearman I am a good spearman both afoot and on horseback".¹¹⁹ No one of the Arsacids would pride himself on being a good infantry soldier. It is no coincidence that such a difference regarding the commonly accepted virtues between the Achaemenid and Arsacid periods can be observed. Under the Arsacids, horse-riding became a symbol of a high social status (cf. fragm. A3), and this development can be explained as the continuation of a steppe tradition. This view can be vindicated by further arguments. Justin observes that the Arsacid Parthians ride horses constantly, using them to go to war and to feasts, and for all private and public affairs (fragm. A3). A comparison of Justin's description with other classical testimonies referring to the nomads shows striking resemblances. Thus, Ammianus Marcellinus (4th century AD) writes about the Huns: „They are almost glued to their horses (...), and sometimes they sit on them in woman-fashion, and thus perform their ordinary tasks. And when deliberations are called for about important matters, they all consult for a common object in that fashion".¹²⁰ Priscus (5th century AD) maintains that the Huns carried on their negotiations with Romans on horseback.¹²¹ Thus, for the nomadic Huns and the Parthians, high status and horse-riding were inevitably connected. In the light of the above mentioned sources there can be no doubt that the remarkable significance of horse-riding in the Parthian way of life – both in social hierarchy and in military sphere – was one of the traditions inherited from the steppe nomads of Central Asia.

The costume of the Arsacid Parthians may give an important clue as to the cultural tradition to which they belonged. The most characteristic Parthian dress was composed of wide trousers and a long sleeved caftan belted around the waist and crossed over the chest, with the right part overlapping the left.¹²² Parts of this garment are depicted as royal dress on most Arsacid coins.¹²³ The best-known representation of a Parthian caftan and trousers is the famous bronze statue from Shami.¹²⁴ A number of other monuments show the Parthians as wearing such clothing.¹²⁵ Representations of persons wearing such garb are

¹¹⁸ Infantry troops did exist but they were of little relevance, compare Dio 40.15.2.

¹¹⁹ *DNb*, 8h.40.45: Kent, *Old Persian*, 140.

¹²⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.6.

¹²¹ Priscus, *EL* 122 (1).

¹²² On the Parthian dress, see Curtis, *Costume*, eadem, *Culture*, and Pilipko, *O kostiune*.

¹²³ Cf. Curtis, *Costume*, 70f., pl. I–II.

¹²⁴ Kawami, *Art*, cat. no. 8, pl. 11; Vogelsang-Eastwood, *Clothing*.

¹²⁵ Comparable with the Shami statue is a stele from Parthian Assur (von Gall, *Architektur und Plastik*, pl. 4a). The Parthian jacket with front closure is depicted on the late Parthian stele from Susa (AD 215), cf. Curtis, *Costume*, pl. 4b.

attested at Kampyr-tepe¹²⁶, at Takht-i Sangin¹²⁷, Tillya-tepe¹²⁸, Khalchayan¹²⁹, and at other sites in western Central Asia. The costume of the Parthian type is documented also in the Caspian steppes at Kosika (on the Volga, 1st century AD).¹³⁰ The use of the crossed-over caftans in conjunction with wide trousers spread during the Arsacid period to many countries from northwestern India up to Mesopotamia and Armenia. In the pre-Arsacid period, a costume similar to the Parthian dress is attested among archaeological objects coming from the steppe areas of Central Asia and southeastern Europe. First the famous grave of Issyk should be mentioned, dated to the 4th–3rd centuries BC. The Sacian chieftain or shaman of Issyk wore a caftan with a V-shaped neckline, and trousers.¹³¹ Similar caftans and trousers are depicted on a vessel from the Scythian cemetery Chastye Kurgany (on the Don, 4th century BC).¹³²

During the pre-Arsacid and Arsacid period peoples living between the Caspian Sea, the Usboi and Aral Lake seem to have stayed in close contact with Iran. This may be surmised from the recent discoveries on the Ustyurt plateau and in the Mangyshlak region.¹³³ They revealed a large number of stone statues dated to the second half of the 1st millennium BC, mainly to the 5th–3rd centuries BC. The dress worn by the nomads in the Transcaspien steppes, as depicted on the sculptures from the Ustyurt and Mangyshlak areas, shows striking similarities to Arsacid garb. Moreover, the sculptures from the steppe were curved frontally, and thus exhibit a general similarity to the Parthian habit of showing figures full-face („Parthian frontality"). Of particular importance is the fact that the Mangyshlak and Ustyurt regions were inhabited by the nomads closely related to the Massagetae and Dahae. In other words, those peoples constituted the milieu, from which the nomads founding the Arsacid Empire came.

To sum up: the Parthian dress was clearly of steppe origin and it was introduced by the Aparthian nomads. Such dress was not employed by the Medes and Persians. They used of course a trouser-suit as appropriate for horse-riding,

¹²⁶ Nikonorov, *Armies* II, fig. 36 e, d.

¹²⁷ Nikonorov, *Armies* II, fig. 27.

¹²⁸ Nikonorov, *Armies* II, fig. 32h.

¹²⁹ Stawiski, *Kunst*, 96.

¹³⁰ Depictions on two vessels, cf. Treister, *New Discoveries*, fig. 24, 27, and 28. It cannot be excluded that the vessels were originally made in Transcaucasia or even in Iran.

¹³¹ Pilipko, *O kostiune*, Fig. 4.2.

¹³² Jacobson, *Art*, Figs. 85, 86a, b.

¹³³ Olkhovskii/ Galkin, *Kompleks*; Zuev/ Ismagilov, *Ritual complexes*; Zuev/ Ismagil, *Steinstelen*.

but it was a quite different garb. The trouser-suit of the Achaemenid Persians and Medians was composed of tight trousers and a long-sleeved tunic.¹³⁴

Warfare and military organization

The present section will focus on the impact of the Central Asian steppe legacy upon the military organization and warfare of Arsacid Iran. As already stated above, the army of the Arsacid Parthians relied on cavalry, their infantry being relatively weak. Parthian cavalry, whose reputation surpassed all others in antiquity, was comprised of two main fighting arms: mounted archers (*hippotoxotai/ equites sagittarii*)¹³⁵ and heavily armoured cavalymen (*kataphraktoi*).¹³⁶ Some accounts of classical authors describe the character of the Parthian military training as well as warfare. For instance, Cassius Dio claims that the Parthians “make no use of a shield, but their forces consist of mounted archers (*hippotoxotai*) and lancers (*kontoforoi*), mostly as cataphracts (*kataphraktoi*). Their infantry is small, made up of the weaker men; but even these are all archers. They practise from boyhood, and the climate and the land combine to aid both horsemanship and archery”.¹³⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus states that the Parthians relied especially on the valour of their cavalry, in which all the nobles and men of rank underwent hard service.¹³⁸ What were the roots of Parthian warfare? This question can be answered by the examination of comparative practices of Achaemenid and Hellenistic Iran as well as of the Central Asian nomads.¹³⁹

In the Achaemenid period (550–330 BC), the cavalry forces of western Central Asian steppe peoples, including the Dahae and Massagetae, and those from the northern satrapies of the Persian empire, including Parthyaia/ Parthia, belonged to the elite of the Achaemenid army. The importance of contingents of the Eastern Iranian and Central Asian peoples to the Achaemenid army is illus-

trated by their role at the battle of Gaugamela (331 BC).¹⁴⁰ Alexander made extensive use of Iranian cavalry forces, including Bactrians, Sogdians, Parthians/ Parthyaianas, Arachotians and Areians.¹⁴¹ Cavalry units of the Dahae were incorporated into Alexander’s army in the Indian campaign as elite cavalry force (327–325 BC).¹⁴² To the royal agema of Alexander, a number of Iranian nobles were admitted, including Sisines and Phradasmanes from Parthia/ Parthyaia (324 BC).¹⁴³ In the armies of the Successors (323–281 BC), the Parthyaian/ Parthians were often fighting alongside the Medes.¹⁴⁴ The Median and Parthyaian/ Parthian cavalry troops constituted the decisive force in several battles under Pithon (in Antigonos’ army)¹⁴⁵ and then under Seleucus I.¹⁴⁶

The Arsacid Parthians, well acquainted with Hellenistic warfare, managed to solve the problem of how to defeat the enemy’s unbroken spear-line and destroy the Macedonian phalanx successfully. Such operations proved possible due to the employment of the cataphracts and horse-archers. Arsacid mounted archers and cataphracts were complementary, each providing the others with powers not inherent in either separately. The horse-bowmen could swarm around the enemy’s troops, shooting them down from a safe distance, for Parthian bows were extremely efficient. If the enemy tried to attack, the Parthian horse retreated and then repeatedly attacked. The broken enemy’s lines were charged by the cataphracts. The acts of disruption were usually followed by the act of annihilation – the final charge of the cataphracts overwhelming the hostile troops. The long lances of the cataphracts, imitating the Macedonian

¹⁴⁰ The cavalry regiments under Mazaeus, including the Medes and the Parthyaianas, disrupted the Macedonian lines and seized the enemy’s base-camp. In another engagement of the same battle, the Macedonian Companions clashed with a retreating detachment of Parthyaianas, Indians and Persians, and lost 60 riders. Superb was Bessos’ cavalry use on the Persian left wing, which included mainly horsemen from Central Asia: Bactrians, Sogdians, Dahae, Persians, Massagetae and Sakas. However, the Persian defeat in the centre forced Bessos to draw his troops off, although in quite good order. For sources and further details, see Olbrycht, *Origins*; Vogelsang, *Rise*, 221–224; Head, *Achaemenid Persian Army*, 67.

¹⁴¹ Arrian, *An.* 5.11.3; 5.12.2; 7.6.3.

¹⁴² Dahae fought as hippotoxotai, cf. Arrian, *An.* 4.24.1; 4.28.8; 5.12.2.; 5.14.3; 5.15.1; 5.16.4; 5.20.3; 5.22.5; 6.5.5.; 6.6.1; 6.21.3; 6.22.1; Curtius 8.14.5; 9.2.24.

¹⁴³ Arrian, *An.* 7.6.4.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Diodorus 19.29.2–3 (Medes and Parthyaianas at the battle of Paraitacene).

¹⁴⁵ It was probably the overwhelming superiority of Pithon’s cavalry, which enabled him to win a victory over the revolting Greeks of the Upper satrapies in 323 BC (Diodorus 18.7.1–9; cf. Tam, *Developments*, 71). At the battle of Paraitacene, Pithon commanded a mighty cavalry division (Diodorus 19.26.1–32.3). In Gabiene, his Iranian cavalry detachments turned the battle into a spectacular success of Antigonos (Diodorus 19.39.6–44.3).

¹⁴⁶ The Iranian cavalry troops were the real military mainstay of Seleucus up to 301 BC. After defeating Nicanor, Seleucus gained control of a large army and annexed Media, Parthyaia and the adjacent regions (Diodorus 19.92.1–5; Appian, *Syr.* 55). At Ipsus (301 BC), Seleucus had 12,000 cavalry, practically all from Iran and Turkestan (cf. Diodorus 20.113.4).

¹³⁴ Bittner, *Tracht und Bewaffnung*, 180ff.

¹³⁵ For the horse-archers in general, cf. Sulimirski, *Archers*.

¹³⁶ On the cataphracts, see Nikonorov, *Sredneaziatskie katafraktarii*; idem, *K voprosu*; Mielczarek, *Cataphracti*.

¹³⁷ Dio 40.15.2.

¹³⁸ Ammianus 23.6.83. He wrote in the 4th century AD, but the description of Persian military affairs refers in many respects to the Parthian period.

¹³⁹ On the genesis of the Arsacid Parthian cavalry forces and tactics, see the fundamental studies by Nikonorov, *Central Asian Nomads*; idem, *Sredneaziatskie katafraktarii*; idem, *Armies* I, 21ff.; Mielczarek, *Cataphracti*. Cf. Olbrycht, *Origins*.

sarissa, but somewhat stronger, and heavy armour made them able to crush the Macedonian phalanx and Roman legions.¹⁴⁷

The earliest explicit literary evidence concerning the genuine Parthian cataphracts is late and dates to the battle of Carrhae (53 BC). But already in 69 BC, the cataphracts fought in the army of the Armenian king Tigranes against the Roman legions at Tigranocerta.¹⁴⁸ In all likelihood these soldiers were not Arsacid Parthians, but cavalry troops recruited from Media Atropatene, a country belonging to the Arsacid Empire. However, the Median cataphracts must have been modelled on Arsacid Parthian cavalrymen. Units of cataphracts are noted also in the Armenian army ca. 53 BC.¹⁴⁹ The first literary testimonies about the cataphracts refer to the presence of such formations in the Seleucid army at the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd century BC.¹⁵⁰ It is scarcely to be expected that they were a Seleucid invention. It was W. W. Tarn who first recognized that the Seleucid cataphracts were borrowed from the Arsacid Parthians under Antiochus III.¹⁵¹ This Seleucid king, who fought against Arsaces II about 209 BC, must have been deeply impressed by the efficiency of Parthian cataphracts and horse-archers, for such arms, being promptly employed in the Seleucid army on a large scale, clearly intended to be the decisive offensive force in the battles of Panion (200 BC)¹⁵² and of Magnesia (190 BC).¹⁵³

In the Achaemenid period, heavy cavalry troops were evolved mainly amongst the steppe peoples of western Central Asia. At Gaugamela, a number of riders and horses of the nomadic cavalry regiments, in all likelihood of the Massagetae, were well protected by defensive armour.¹⁵⁴ Herodotus¹⁵⁵ and Strabo¹⁵⁶ mention breastplates for horses and corselets for riders as employed

¹⁴⁷ Tarn (*Developments*, 76) pointed out: "For centuries cataphracts were the weapon of Asia".

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Plutarch, *Luc.* 26.6; 28.1–7; Sallustius, *Hist.* 64–65 (Maurenbrecher). Some authors – Eutropius 6.9 and Festus 15 – use the term *clibanarii* for heavy armoured cavalry troops of Tigranes. For more details, see Mielczarek, *Cataphracts*, 51f.

¹⁴⁹ Plutarch, *Crass.* 18.3 and 19.1.

¹⁵⁰ Polybius 16.18; 30.25; Livy 35.48; 37.40; Appian, *Syr.* 32; Florus 1.24; Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai* 194D–F. Cf. Mielczarek, *Cataphracts*, 67ff.

¹⁵¹ „Antiochus III made the acquaintance of the cataphract, such as he then was, when he invaded Parthia, and he experimented with some at the battle of Magnesia” – Tarn, *Developments*, 76. Cf. also Mielczarek, *Cataphracts*.

¹⁵² In the battle of Panion, the Seleucid cataphracts overwhelmed Ptolemaic horsemen and alongside with the elephants largely contributed to the victory – see Polybius 16.18–19.

¹⁵³ At Magnesia, Antiochus's army included 6,000 cataphracts and 1,200 horse-archers of the Dahae (Livy 37.40).

¹⁵⁴ Arrian 3.13.4.

¹⁵⁵ Herodotus 1.215.

¹⁵⁶ Strabo 11.8.6.

by the Massagetae. This steppe people was closely related to the early Arsacids,¹⁵⁷ so it is conceivable that the development of the Massagetaean arms and tactics influenced the military equipment of the neighbouring Dahae and the early Arsacids in Parthia. It is more than coincidence that significant objects documenting an early development of heavy cavalry come from the areas, which were controlled or directly influenced by the Massagetae and Dahae. An early representation of a heavily armoured cavalryman (on a ceramic fragment), dating from the beginning of the 3rd century BC, has been found at Khumbuz-tepe (Southern Chorasmia).¹⁵⁸ At Chirik-Rabat (east of the Aral Sea), pieces of cavalry armour have been discovered, belonging to a heavily armoured rider.¹⁵⁹ Both finds can be connected with the initial stage of the cataphracts' development. From Old Nisa (Northern Parthia) armour pieces of a cataphract come.¹⁶⁰ When fighting against the Macedonians, Iranian cavalrymen saw that the long Macedonian lances had an advantage over their own short javelins or spears.¹⁶¹ Iranian noblemen (including Parthians/ Parthyaiaans), admitted to the royal agema of Alexander, were equipped with Macedonian lances in place of shorter „barbarian“ javelins.¹⁶² Apparently, some Iranian cavalry, including the Parthians/ Parthyaiaans and the steppe peoples of the Massagetae and perhaps Dahae, adopted long lances imitating the Macedonian sarissa in the Hellenistic period. It was this innovation, which largely contributed to the emergence of a new kind of cavalry force – the cataphracts.

The Arsacid Parthians gave a prominent role to the cataphracts. That cavalry force, combined with the horse-archers, earned the Arsacids decisive triumphs over armies of contemporary powers. One such overwhelming victory was the crushing defeat of the Roman legions at the battle of Carrhae (53 BC). During the Arsacid period, cataphract cavalry appeared in those areas, which were influenced or subjugated by the Parthians, e.g. in Media Atropatene and Armenia.¹⁶³ Heavy cavalry troops similar to the Parthian cataphracts also developed

¹⁵⁷ The Apasiacae, a tribe from the Massagetaean confederation, supported Arsaces I (Strabo 11.8.8) and Arsaces II (cf. Polybius 10.48 with Olbrycht, *Parthia* 64f.) in their military campaigns against the Seleucids.

¹⁵⁸ Mambetullaev, *Reliefnoe izobrazhenie*. Cf. Nikonorov, *Armies* I, 21; II, 4, fig. 4g.

¹⁵⁹ Tolstov, *Po drevnim delam*, 148, 150, fig. 82.

¹⁶⁰ Pugachenkova, *O pantsirnom vooruzhenii*, 33f.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Arrian, *An.* 1.15.

¹⁶² Arrian, *An.* 7.6.5.

¹⁶³ Imitating the Parthians, the Romans also introduced units of cataphracts in their army (2nd century AD), see CIL XI 5632. Cf. Mielczarek, *Cataphracts*, 73–85.

amongst the Sarmatian tribes,¹⁶⁴ midst the nomads of Central Asia (including the Sacae) and in Bactria of the pre-Kushan und Kushan period.¹⁶⁵

The horse-archers of the Arsacids were principally of Central Asian origin, having evolved especially among the nomadic Dahae¹⁶⁶; their mounted bowmen distinguished themselves in the fierce struggles against Alexander's forces and then, in the Hellenistic period, belonged to the best mercenary troops in the East. The Dahae exhibited their military valour as excellent light cavalry troops in the army of Spitamenes fighting against the Macedonian invasion (329–327 BC). Spitamenes' greatest exploit was the victory on the Polytimetos/ Zervashan,¹⁶⁷ in which his troops, comprising Bactrian and Sogdian cavalry units as well as Dahae mounted archers routed a mighty Macedonian-Greek division.¹⁶⁸ As already mentioned above, Alexander fully recognized the quality of the Turkestan cavalry troops, and used the excellent cavalry units of the Dahae in India.

To sum up: in developing their cavalry forces, the Arsacids followed primarily the steppe traditions of the Dahae and Massagetae,¹⁶⁹ enriched by some local developments of Parthyaia/ Parthia and influenced by Hellenistic warfare. On the whole, it was especially the Parthyaia/ Parthians who managed to become familiar with Hellenistic warfare, including the use of Western arms. The Parthians/ Parthayains of the Hellenistic epoch were neighbours of the steppe peoples of the Massagetae and Dahae, and as such they must have acted as intermediaries between Hellenistic Iran and the steppe world. Besides, fighting in Alexander's army, the Dahae were able to know Macedonian tactics, arms and armour. The Roman historian Justin claims rightly that the fashion of Parthian arms was „partly native, partly Scythian“, it means Iranian and nomadic.¹⁷⁰ The highly skilled light horse-archers of the Dahae fulfilled a skirmish and harass function in the battles and supported the actions of the

¹⁶⁴ Mielczarek, *Cataphracti*, 95ff.

¹⁶⁵ For the cataphracts and similar cavalry formations in western Central Asia and Bactria, see Nikonorov, *Armies*, 50ff. and passim.

¹⁶⁶ The mounted archers did not play any important role in the Iranian warfare under the Achaemenids and they are seldom attested (cf. the presence of Bactrian horse-archers in the battle of Plataea, 479 BC - Herodotus 9.49).

¹⁶⁷ Various reported in Curtius (7.7.31–39) and Arrian (*An.* 4.5.2–9; 4.6.1–2).

¹⁶⁸ 2,000 foot and 300 horse of Alexander's army were killed, only few escaped. Horse archers – apparently Dahae forces (cf. Curtius 7.7.31–39) – proved particularly effective, whilst other cavalry units repeatedly charged the disrupted formation of the Macedonians.

¹⁶⁹ Concerning military issues, Coulston (*Developments*, 70) is convincing in his statement: „The Parthian takeover of Mesopotamia-Iran replaced the Old Persian system with the steppe form“.

¹⁷⁰ Justin 41.2.4.

cataphracts. The Arsacid Parthians employed large numbers of horse-archers, reaching up to almost 50,000 soldiers in one campaign. The horse-archery tactics originated in the milieu of the Turkestan nomads, and not in Iran. Those tactical developments are closely connected with changes in armour and weaponry, as shown by the evolution of the cataphracts. The cataphracts seem to have appeared amongst the Central Asian nomads at the end of the 4th – beginning of the 3rd century BC, and they were a response to Hellenistic tactics. While Iran remained under the control of Hellenistic rulers, the steppe tribes of Central Asia, especially the Massagetae and the Dahae, developed a new kind of cavalry troops, which enabled them to fight efficiently against Graeco-Macedonian armies. Thus, the Central Asian nomadic cavalrymen employed a new type of lance imitating the Macedonian sarissa. Additionally, the cataphracts were equipped with heavy armour for horse and man. On the whole, the nomadic subjugation of Iran caused a shift over to reliance upon cavalry as the primary tactical arm.

Finally, there is another issue, which may be of significance with regard to the origins of Parthian warfare. Steppe traditions seem to have directly influenced the organization of the Parthian army, which was based on a decimal system. Lucian knows a Parthian division as having 1,000 soldiers. Also in the army of Surenas at Carrhae a decimal grade is to be observed.¹⁷¹ Achaemenid military units were organized decimally, too.¹⁷² However, the tradition of the Achaemenid military organization was interrupted after Alexander's invasion and replaced by new Hellenistic patterns, which used another system.¹⁷³ It seems probable that the Arsacids followed the steppe legacy of Middle and Central Asia, in which the rigid decimal organization of armies predominated, as seen among the Hsiung-nu.¹⁷⁴ The decimal system also existed in the military forces of the European Huns.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Lucian, *Quomodo hist.* 29; Cf. Shahbazi, *Army*, 496.

¹⁷² Shahbazi, *Army*, 492.

¹⁷³ On the structure of Hellenistic armies, see Bar Kochva, *Judas Maccabaeus*, 8ff. The basic unit of the Seleucid phalanx was the column made up of 16 soldiers.

¹⁷⁴ Each of the 24 leaders of the Hsiung-nu had a force of 10,000 soldiers which were subdivided along decimal lines, see Shih-chi/ Watson II, 163f. Each of the 24 leaders in turn appointed his own „chiefs of a thousand“, „chiefs of a hundred“, and chiefs of a ten“. The decimal system was used especially in time of war, see Barfield, *Hsiung-nu Confederacy*, 48f.

¹⁷⁵ Nikonorov, *Voennoe delo*, 239 with n. 16.

Conclusions

The most obvious approach to ascertain the importance of the nomadic traditions in Parthian Iran lies in the study of the social structure and military developments in the Arsacid Empire, with particular reference to its origins. To understand Arsacid history properly it must be kept in mind that the Parthian kingdom emerged as the result of a nomadic invasion in northeastern Iran. Although tightly bound to their steppe heritage, the Arsacids showed a remarkable ability to adopt promptly and efficiently a number of the hallmarks associated with the sedentary peoples whom they had subjugated, including the establishment of new cities, the creation of strongholds, and the introduction of a coinage system. On the whole, the first Arsacids – Arsaces I and Arsaces II – managed to create a new stable state.¹⁷⁶

The character of socio-economic and cultural relations within the Arsacid kingdom is an extremely complex one. The Arsacid Parthians maintained different relations with the nomads of Central Asia and the Caspian-Pontic steppes, including ties in terms of political marriages and alliances, moreover, even some Parthian kings highlighted their nomadic background (e.g. Sina-truces and Artabanus II). All those links strengthened the nomadic legacy in Parthia.

After the conquest of Parthyaia and Hyrcania, Arsaces I found himself in the predicament of ruling two worlds: the nomadic Aparni and the settled population of northeastern Iran. Apparently, the principal under which the social structure of the Arsacid heartland and of Arsacid Parthia operated was the nomadic legacy of the Aparni. The rigid division of Parthian society into „freemen“ and the lower ranks of the dependants as well as the dichotomies between an „equestrian estate“ and the rest of society (peasants and townsmen) originated in the period when the Arsacid kingdom was established and when the invading nomads subjugated the indigenous population of northeastern Iran. Essentially, the aristocracy of the victorious Aparni became the ruling

¹⁷⁶ In the history of Iran and Central Asia, a number of states of the conquest type emerged as established by the intruders from the steppe. As a rule, the nomads quickly adopted important achievements of the sedentary populations. Thus, the Seljuk steppe chieftains “easily acclimatized to the regal trappings of Middle Eastern monarchy” (Golden, *History*, 219). The early Ghaznavids showed “remarkable faculty for assimilation to the Perso-Islamic governmental ethos in the lands which they took over” (Bosworth, *Incursions*, 9). The Qar-luk Khans and Seljuk Begs “achieved power with surprising ease, when one considers the superiority in manpower, weapons and equipment which the conventional professional armies of the Sāmānids, Būyids and Ghaznavids must have possessed” (Bosworth, *Incursions*, 10).

elite in Parthia, but it assimilated – mainly in the lower ranks – also parts of the traditional sedentary Iranian nobility of Parthyaia (and the adjacent lands including Hyrcania). Parthian social structure was closely connected with the state’s military organization, which for the most part was founded on nomadic practices inherited from the Aparni.

The ethos of the Arsacid Parthians – understood as the fundamental character underlying the Parthian guiding assumptions, customs, manners, mentality and Arsacid social as well as military institutions – was quite different from that of the Iranians in the Achaemenid period.¹⁷⁷ This ethos was essentially of nomadic descentance. Particularly striking in the picture of Parthian society is a close connection between higher status and horse-riding.¹⁷⁸ Horse-riding was treated by the Parthians as a hallmark of upper social ranks, being essentially reserved only for the free born men. Needless to say the military position of Parthian cavalry reflected this as well. All this is again nomadic heritage, and not Iranian sedentary tradition. Also the Parthian dress was of steppe origin. As rightly recognized by H. von Gall, the Parthian dress is to be treated as „ein Prärogativ, eine Art Amtstracht“, especially in the conquered territories of western Iran and Mesopotamia.¹⁷⁹ As far as can be judged at the present state of research, the iconographic materials provided by the statues from Ustyurt and Mangyshlak areas supply new evidence pointing towards close cultural relations between the Arsacid Parthians and the nomads of western Central Asia and set the research of many aspects of the nomadic-Parthian affinities upon a new course.

Generally speaking, the main fighting arms of the Parthians, the cataphracts and the horse-archers, were principally of steppe origin. The early Arsacid cavalry forces with their special equipment and highly sophisticated tactics were created in the milieu embracing the nomadic Dahae and Massagetae in Central Asia. A certain role in this process was played also by the sedentary Parthyaiaans/ Parthians in northeastern Iran. In developing their warfare, the nomads of the pre-Arsacid period, and then the Arsacid Parthians had to take

¹⁷⁷ Most central to a number of ancient societies was the aristocratic warrior ethos, in some aspects comparable with the ethos of the Arsacid Parthians. See, e.g., Gropp, *Herrscherethos*, 32–42 (military ethos of the Achaemenid Persians and the Macedonians); McCall, *Cavalry*, 2–12 and 78–99 (Roman cavalry and elite reputation); Hanson, *Classical Ethos*, 111–126 (Greek egalitarian military ethos); Nikonorov, *Voennoe delo*, 273f. (ethos of the Huns in Europe).

¹⁷⁸ A similar phenomenon – a link between cavalry service and elite status – is well documented in the history of Rome throughout the Republic. The term „cavalrymen“ (*equites*) referred there to a distinct class of the Romans, which was superior, in social and economic terms, to the infantry, see McCall, *Cavalry*, 2ff.

¹⁷⁹ Von Gall, *Architektur und Plastik*, 77.

into account Hellenistic innovations brought into Iran and Middle Asia by Alexander the Great and his successors.

The culture of the Parthians, their political, economic and military institutions underwent different influences, including Hellenistic and Old Iranian traditions. At the same time, the essential components of Parthian society, way of life and warfare remained rather conservative and were based on steppe nomadic factors, and as such they exhibit no principal ties with the Achaemenid period or with other traditions of the sedentary world in Western Asia.

The arguments I have put forward are best summarized by the classical writer Strabo, who evaluates the character of the Parthians. Thus, he claims that they „rule over so much land and so many tribes that in the size of their empire they have become, in a way, rivals of the Romans. The cause of this is their mode of life (*bios*), and also their customs (*ethe*), which contain much that is barbarian and Scythian in character, and which are conducive to power and success in war“.¹⁸⁰ In other words, nomadic elements proved to be one of the decisive causes of the Parthian rise to a world empire.

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¹⁸⁰ Strabo 11.9.2.

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Abbreviations

DNP = Der Neue Pauly

Enclr = Encyclopaedia Iranica